

THE DISSEMINATION OF RUSSIAN-SOURCED NEWS IN AFRICA

A preliminary general map

Kevin LIMONIER

Lecturer at the French Geopolitics Institute (Paris 8 University)

ABSTRACT

Although the Russian media apparatus is subject to considerable scrutiny in the West, it is much less so in other regions of the world, in particular in Africa. Consequently, at a time when Russia appears to be attempting to regain footing on the continent, it seemed necessary to undertake a preliminary exploration of the role that this country can play in the African information space, with particular focus on the French-speaking countries of Africa. This paper presents the results of a quantitative study of the distribution and propagation of information content produced by the Russian news agencies RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik News. On the basis of the data collected, it has been possible to establish an initial general map of the circulation paths of this content, its relays and the discursive strategies used by the various players involved. In addition to its empirical value as an aid to understanding the real state of Russian implantation in the information space of the French-speaking African world, this paper also aims to highlight the methodological possibilities available, by explaining the methods used here, at the intersection of geopolitics and big data.

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INTRODUCTION

Between November 2017 and January 2018, the Facebook page of RT France (the French-language edition of the Russian channel “Russia Today,” based in Paris) recorded a massive increase in subscribers. In less than two months, the page went from about 500,000 to more than 850,000 *likes*, constituting almost a doubling of its audience in only a few weeks. However, upon closer inspection, it was found that the vast majority of these new subscriber profiles were not from France but from several French-speaking countries of the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa: for example, during this period, RT’s French-language Facebook page gained only 1,000 accounts located in France (according to Facebook criteria), compared to almost 30,000 in Algeria, 10,000 in Morocco, 9,000 in Tunisia and 5,000 in Mali, not to mention the thousands of others in Senegal, Cameroon, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast. This sudden increase, coinciding with an advertising campaign targeting African audiences at exactly the same time as RT began broadcasting in France, illustrates the enthusiasm of African audiences for Russian media in the French language.¹

The Russian media apparatus has long been structured around the public agencies RIA Novosti and the Voice of Russia radio station, which was more commonly known as Radio Moscow during the Soviet period. Following the “colour revolutions” (in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan) and the major role played in these movements, according to Russian media, by certain western NGOs, the Russian media intended for international audiences were progressively reorganized. The birth of the Russia Today (RT) channel in 2005 marked the start of this gradual process, which culminated, at the end of 2013, for reasons that we will explain later, in the closure of the international service of RIA Novosti and Voice of Russia, and their replacement by a single news agency called Rossiya Sedona (Russia Today). This new agency manages seven media channels, including Sputnik News. Today, Sputnik and RT constitute the heart of the Russian media apparatus, broadcasting in foreign languages and depending largely on public funding.² In 2016, the American accusations of interference in the presidential election that brought Donald Trump to power³ helped to bring these platforms into the public eye. They have since been accused of providing support to populist movements in several countries of Europe, including France.⁴

However, although the West is certainly an important zone of activity for these media, it is not the only one. In Latin America, the Spanish-language version of RT can even count on local “stars,” such as the former Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa, who hosts a weekly show on the channel. In Africa, the influence of the Russian RT and Sputnik media seems to be less structured, particularly due to the linguistic division of the continent and the absence of editions specifically dedicated to this part of the world. Nevertheless, as is testified by the sudden rise in subscribers to RT’s French-language Facebook page at the beginning of 2018, this lack of structure does not signify a lack of public interest in the channel in French-speaking Africa – quite the opposite. Although not easily measurable, the success of the Russian media platforms in African countries where French is spoken by a large proportion of the population is a palpable reality: many African news sites now provide content produced by the Russian media, in the same way that they relay the major western agencies. On social media (especially Facebook), we have observed that users declaring themselves to be located in Africa are very active commenters of content shared by Russian news media.

A large number of hypotheses can be proposed to explain this success. The first is purely mathematical: according to the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, there are almost as many French speakers on the African continent⁵ as in France. So, it is hardly surprising that Africans are present in high numbers, especially given the fact that the development of mobile internet in Africa over the last decade has given an increasing number of Africans access to the network. However, this explanation is far from sufficient, in particular because it ignores the major differences in sociological conditions from one country to another in French-speaking Africa.

Another hypothesis would be that the Russian media platforms produce content that, for various reasons, is appreciated by African public opinion. It is true that Russia enjoys a positive image on the African continent, inherited from the

1. Data from l’Observatoire de l’infosphère russophone – Chaire Castex de Cyberstratégie (Observatory of Russian-speaking Cyberspace – Castex Chair of Cyberstrategy), February 2018.

2. Kevin Limonier and Maxime Audinet, “La stratégie d’influence informationnelle et numérique de la Russie en Europe,” *Hérodote*, No. 1, Vol. 164, 2017, p. 123-144.

3. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Background to “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections”: The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution, Washington DC, National Intelligence Council, 2017.

4. Stéphane François and Olivier Schmitt, “Le conspirationnisme dans la Russie contemporaine,” *Diogène*, No. 1, Vol. 249-250, 2015, p. 120.

5. According to the ‘Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, 44% of French speakers are located in Europe and 47% on the African continent. See: <https://www.francophonie.org/Estimation-des-francophones.html>.

Cold War and the support given by the USSR to anti-colonialist movements. This favourable reputation places Russia in de facto competition with the western nations, in particular France, as a former colonial power, for the credibility and popularity of the information that it produces.

In some countries where the role of France is particularly important in local political debates, the content produced by the Russian platforms can even be mobilized by militants of certain political movements to counter the positions put forward by France. In such cases, these militants adopt a news machine produced with Moscow's money and resources. This is especially true in the case of Ivory Coast, where the supporters of Laurent Gbagbo can draw on Russian content to advance their positions against president Ouattara and his French backers. More broadly, the Pan-African movement and its ideas can draw on content produced by the Russian news agencies for material that can be directly mobilized in their specific political combats. The same is true for the movement against the CFA Franc, to which RT has dedicated a number of articles.

In fact, over the last few years, Russia has embarked on a mission to re-establish itself in countries such as the Central African Republic (arms sales, arrival of Russian military advisers and PMCs), Guinea (where Russia owns aluminum and gold deposits), Algeria⁶ and other countries of the Maghreb⁷ and Sub-Saharan Africa, some of which were once close to the USSR.⁸ In this context, the success of the Russian media on the continent seems to be due in particular to their content, which is massively quoted, shared and discussed at the local level. In other words, there is a degree of "transmission" between the Russian agencies and various African influencers, such as local or regional news sites, influential accounts on social media (Facebook, YouTube etc.) and even local political and civil society movements.

So, the circulation of ideas, narratives and materials produced by the Russian agencies is founded on both formal and informal networks of information relays. These relaying networks can be of an extremely diverse nature and can pursue very different – and even conflicting – aims. Their main common denominator is that they circulate content produced according to a logic that is often based on appropriation or even misappropriation. In other words, these players "appropriate" (or misappropriate) Russian materials and use them to reinforce their own political agendas, which are often far removed from the interests and strategic preoccupations of Russia.⁹

This general mechanism is neither new nor specific to the subject that concerns us here: during the Cold War, Marshall McLuhan already evoked the challenges posed by the constantly accelerating speed of information circulation,¹⁰ at a time when the notions of disinformation and propaganda were being widely debated on both sides of the Iron Curtain.¹¹ Some of these debates have now been resurrected since the victory of Donald Trump in the United States and the accusation of "interference" by Russia in America's democratic process, to the point where opinions are now divided on the exact nature of the mission currently entrusted by the State to Russian media agencies – with epithets ranging from "propaganda"¹² to "public diplomacy."¹³ For our part, in this paper, we will consider the propagation of the content produced by these agencies as a strictly quantitative phenomenon that is impossible to *qualify* until it has been *quantified* and *mapped*.

In other words, the aim of this paper is not to measure Russian influence and its effects on the African continent but to shine a light on the main mechanisms used to propagate and increase the visibility of the content produced by the RT and Sputnik news agencies, which are considered in this paper as the main producers of Russian content circulated in Africa.

Thus, this paper has a dual aim. First, we will attempt to identify, through an essentially quantitative analysis, some of the main narratives that are mobilized by Russian content concerning either the entire African continent or certain individual countries and that can help to explain the success of Russian media. Second, we will attempt to provide a preliminary classification of the relays of this content, using two distinct typologies, one typology that classifies the

6. Isabelle Facon, *Le Jeu d'influence de la Russie en zone Afrique du Nord/Moyen-Orient*, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, Observatoire du monde arabo-musulman et du Sahel, 2017.

7. Arnaud Dubien, "Russie – Afrique du Nord : vieux amis et nouveaux partenaires," *Diplomatie*, No. 94, October 2018.

8. Eleftheris Vigne, *Présences chinoise et russe en Afrique : différences, convergences, conséquences*, Focus Paper 37, Brussels, Institut Royal Supérieur de Défense, July 2018.

9. Kevin Limonier and Colin Gérard, "Guerre hybride russe dans le cyberspace," *Hérodote*, No. 3-4, Vol. 166-167, 2017, p. 145-163.

10. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964.

11. Stephanie K. Whittle, *Conquest from Within: A Comparative Analysis between Soviet Active Measures and United States Unconventional Warfare Doctrine*, US Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth, 2015. On the Soviet side, we would recommend the work of Alexandre Zinoviev titled *Para Bellum* (1982) published in French by Julliard in 1985.

12. Tetyana Ogarkova, "La sur-réalité de la Russie contemporaine," *Cahiers Sens public*, No. 1-2, Vol. 17-18, 2014, p. 227-234.

13. Maxime Audinet, "Diplomaties publiques concurrentielles dans la crise ukrainienne," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, No. 2, 2018, p. 35.

relays according to their country/countries or area(s) of action, and a second that defines the relays according to their semantic environment – i.e. their positioning in relation to certain political themes that determines their action. This paper is not intended to substitute a qualitative analysis. On the contrary, we hope that this quantitative study will clear the way for our colleagues with expert knowledge of Africa to examine the propagation of Russian content on the continent in light of the political, social, economic and religious situations specific to each country.

CHOSEN METHODOLOGIES

Starting premise: the diversity of propagation vectors precludes their overall cartography

In general, the propagation of textual content (understood here to mean text in digital format) can employ almost all digital means of communication available to the general public – social networks, of course (Facebook, Twitter etc.), but also email (mailing lists), encrypted messaging services (WhatsApp, Telegram etc.), streaming, forums, etc. The range of distribution vectors is so large that it would be illusory to attempt to present a comprehensive typology of them here.

In fact, it is fundamentally impossible to consider all the vectors by which a particular content can be distributed, due to the quantity and diversity of these vectors. Evidently, we could work from the assumption that only a handful of popular vectors will concentrate the overwhelming majority of dynamic distribution routes for any given content, and that all the other intermediate services will occupy a sufficiently marginal space to be able to ignore them.

However, even when considering a restricted number of platforms, we are confronted with the problem of data accessibility in compliance with the applicable legislation. Although it is theoretically possible to trace the propagation of an item of content on a particular social network by analyzing the metadata made available by its API (Application Programming Interface), we will always, sooner or later, come up against major limitations imposed by the owner of the service, depending on its economic model or privacy policy. For example, one of the most widely analyzed social media today is Twitter, since this company provides access, via its API, to a considerable amount of metadata. By contrast, Facebook has for many years been committed to a policy of limiting the metadata available via its API, whilst the recent scandal of Cambridge Analytica (a company that was caught out precisely due to its strategy for getting around the policy applied by Facebook to protect the personal data stored on its platform) has resulted in the imposition of even stricter restrictions.

So, without even considering the question of legality, the massive processing of data derived from social media would not be the most satisfactory means of studying the mechanisms of propagating the content produced by Russian media, especially given the fact that the most popular social network in Africa – Facebook – is also one of the most restrictive.

Websites as the vector of choice

This is why we have chosen to concentrate on the oldest – and most important – distribution vector on the internet, namely websites. In fact, even with the full panoply of resources that now exist to distribute or propagate textual content, the method that consists in displaying the content in HTML code on a server accessible via a URL remains the most widespread.¹⁴

Also, data collection from web pages is free and open and does not depend on any API or owner. In theory, all you need is a web indexing program called a “crawler,” which automatically visits all or part of the web to record the public

14. Moreover, the propagation of content on social media or other types of intermediation platform (email, private messaging service etc.) often consists in sharing a URL, so that, strictly speaking, the user accesses the textual content via a web page external to the service used to share its address.

content in a database. In fact, this is the principle used by all the major search engines (Google, Bing, Yandex, Baidu etc.): search engine crawlers permanently and systematically browse the web looking for new pages to index.

In our case, we undertook to create a database of all the pages that had cited all or part of one of the 548 articles concerning Africa produced by RT and Sputnik between 1 January and 1 August 2018.¹⁵ This choice was based on the empirical examination of an entire galaxy of websites, blogs and forums where this content is recopied, appropriated and mobilized as a function of the specific political agendas and ideologies of the relay concerned.

For this purpose, we used the biggest public indexing database currently in existence: Google. The reason for this is that if we had wished to use only our own web crawlers without first employing those of Google, we would have first had to index the entire web and only then extract the pages containing content from RT and Sputnik. This operation would of course have required computing and storage capacity far beyond our means. So, we relied on the Google databases, remaining fully aware of certain limitations. The fact is that although Google has the most complete index in existence today, its bots barely crawl through 20% – 30% of existing web pages. The remaining 70% consists either of pages that cannot be indexed, because they are inaccessible without user identification (this is what is commonly known as the “deep web”), or pages whose administrators refuse all referencing whatsoever (what is known as the “dark web”). So, in practice, our study covers 30% of the visible “surface” web.

The data provided by Google was harvested automatically, using a “web scrapping” tool, which is a technique for content extraction that is similar to the method used by the indexing bots. Our scrapper retrieved all the URLs¹⁶ detected by Google as containing all or part of the 548 articles concerning Africa produced by RT or Sputnik between 1 January and 1 August 2018.

GENERAL PRESENTATION OF THE DATABASE – GENERAL RESULTS

The results of these operations constitute a database containing 3,889 pages that have reproduced all or part of an RT or Sputnik article. These pages are distributed across 622 different domain names.¹⁷ In other words, the method described above enabled us to identify more than 600 entities (websites, blogs etc.) that could be considered as relays of the Russian media agencies publishing content in French on the subject of Africa. Evidently, the term “relay” here should be understood in its broadest sense. It does not necessarily imply that the administrators of these entities are politically motivated to spread the content of RT and Sputnik. On the contrary, the reasons why these sites reproduce Russian content are extremely diverse.

General typology of the sites in the database

First, we established an initial typology of the 622 entities present in our database. These entities can be divided into four broad categories, which will serve as the underlying canvas for the remainder of this study. The four categories are intermediation platforms, content aggregators, “institutional” websites and blogs.

15. These articles were identified via a series of requests using different keywords (typically “Africa,” “Ivory Coast,” “Algeria,” “Touadéra,” etc.), which provided us with an initial automatic sort of the data. A second manual sort was then carried out to remove the articles that, while containing one of the above keywords, in fact focused on other related subjects, such as declarations by European politicians on the migration crisis.

16. URLs (Uniform Resource Locators) constitute a uniform naming convention for accessing web resources (HTML pages, videos, documents etc.). In other words, URLs correspond to web addresses.

17. A domain name is an identifier of an internet domain, such as www.geopolitique.net. Pages correspond to precise content on a domain name. For example, www.geopolitique.net/XYZ.html, where XYZ.html corresponds to a page.

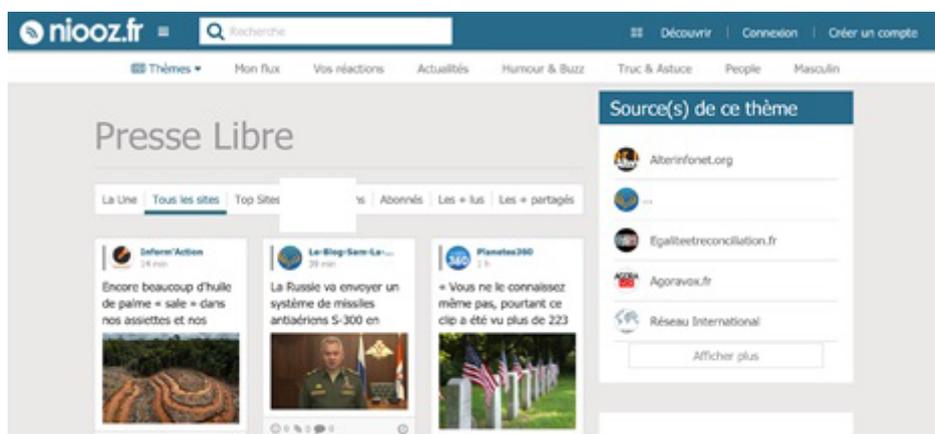
Category 1: Intermediation platforms

Intermediation platforms constitute what Stéphane Grumbach and Stéphane Frénot described in 2014 as “new digital services” with the role of “connecting people with people, people with services and, more generally, things with things. The search engine, as the first major intermediation system, puts people into contact with knowledge. Social networks interconnect people in their environment.”¹⁸ Social networks, quite logically, constitute almost all the intermediation platforms in our database, with Facebook, of course, Twitter, YouTube and also Pinterest (a network for sharing images). Given that our method is dependent on Google’s indexing policy, we are fully aware that we have only harvested a tiny proportion of the RT and Sputnik content reproduced on all available platforms. This is because the indexing bots only index the public pages, whereas most of the information that circulates on social media is only accessible after logging in (and even, in some cases, after our correspondent has accepted to establish a connection, for example by becoming a “friend” on Facebook). In fact, most of this content belongs to the “deep web,” which is inaccessible to indexers.

Category 2: Content aggregators

The second major category of websites present in our database is the content aggregator. Content aggregators can be defined as platforms that display content from a large number of sources on a single page. In general, this category includes syndication platforms (RSS feeds) and large-scale services such as Google News or Yahoo! News. However, most of the content aggregators found in our database do not belong to either of these two main platform types. Although Google News is certainly included in the database, since it automatically reproduces RT and Sputnik content, we find relatively less popular platforms, or platforms with an exclusively regional (or even local) readership, such as the website *Africain.info*, which describes itself as an “A press review for African news.” Although this site has the modest ranking of the 122,842nd most visited website in the world, it is the 36th most popular website in Chad.¹⁹ Here, the sharing of content produced by RT and Sputnik is automatic, and it is difficult to determine whether there is any deliberate choice by the site administrators to privilege one source over another. By contrast, another aggregator, called *niooz.fr*, would seem to be more problematic. Visited especially by users located in France, DRC, Algeria and Burkina Faso, this website looks like a classic aggregator operating under the control of “neutral” algorithms. However, a classification of categories reveals an interesting bias, since the sub-domain *free.niooz.fr*, dedicated to the “free press” (in the website’s own words) in reality collates a major proportion of the French-language conspiracy platforms, such as Réseau international, Égalité et Réconciliation and alterinfo.net.

Screenshot of the “free press” section of news aggregator niooz.fr



18. Stéphane Frénot and Stéphane Grumbach, “Des données à l’intermédiation, une révolution économique et politique” in Lisette Calderan *et al.*, *Big data: nouvelles partitions de l’information*, De Boeck, 2014, p. 22.

19. Source: Alexa.

Category 3: “Institutional,” generalist or militant sites

The third category of website most frequently encountered in our database is the “institutional website,” i.e. sites belonging to a clearly identified institution, usually in the form of a corporate entity (press corporation, newspaper etc.). We can identify two sub-categories of “institutional” sites that relay RT and Sputnik:

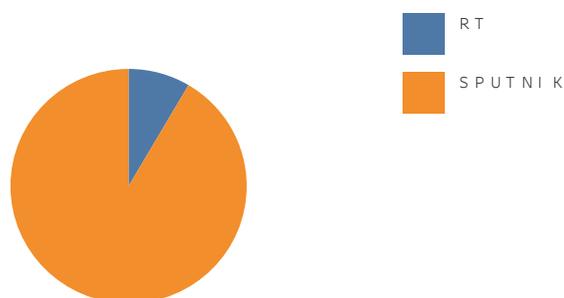
- The first sub-category is that of the generalist institutional websites, i.e. the sites that reproduce content from politically very diverse sources. Naturally, we should treat this sub-category with caution here, since the author and research team are not experts on any particular African country, and so certain subtleties intrinsic to the internal political situation may have escaped our notice. Generalist institutional sites constitute a very large part of our database, and these are the sites that most massively relay RT and Sputnik content. So, they play a part in the “normalization” of these two agencies, since the Russian content appears on these websites next to the content of agencies with a well-established reputation in Africa, such as RFI, Jeune Afrique or TV5 Monde.
- The second sub-category is that of the “militant” institutional sites. Here too, this qualification is subject to a more specialized, in-depth knowledge of the internal politics of each individual African country, and it is possible that certain sites may appear to our eyes to be generalist when they are in fact militant, or vice versa. However, we have been able to identify several platforms as unequivocally “militant,” such as *afriquemedias.tv*, a Pan-African TV channel based in Cameroon that we will discuss again later. Another example of a militant institutional site is *africa24.info*, which is particularly visited by users in Guinea and Ivory Coast and has more than 121,000 followers on Facebook. Its editorial line is so close to that of Sputnik that its motto (“We tell you what others won’t say”) is also a paraphrase of the motto of the Russian media agency (“Telling the untold”).

Category 4: Blogs

The final category of website in our database is that of “blogs,” i.e. pages generated in a more or less formal process by one or more people and usually hosted on platforms such as Wordpress or Overblog. Sites of this type are present in particularly high numbers in our database, and it is difficult to estimate their audience, because the main traffic measuring services, such as Alexa, do not provide any information about them. Nevertheless, they constitute an interesting ecosystem, since the reproduction of RT or Sputnik articles on these sites is often militant, in that it is used to support a cause or an idea defended by the blog administrator (who is often a politically engaged physical person). Hence, blogs are the best sites for a qualitative study of the circulation of the ideas and positions promoted by the Russian agencies in one part of African public opinion.

RT and Sputnik: different approaches to information and different relays

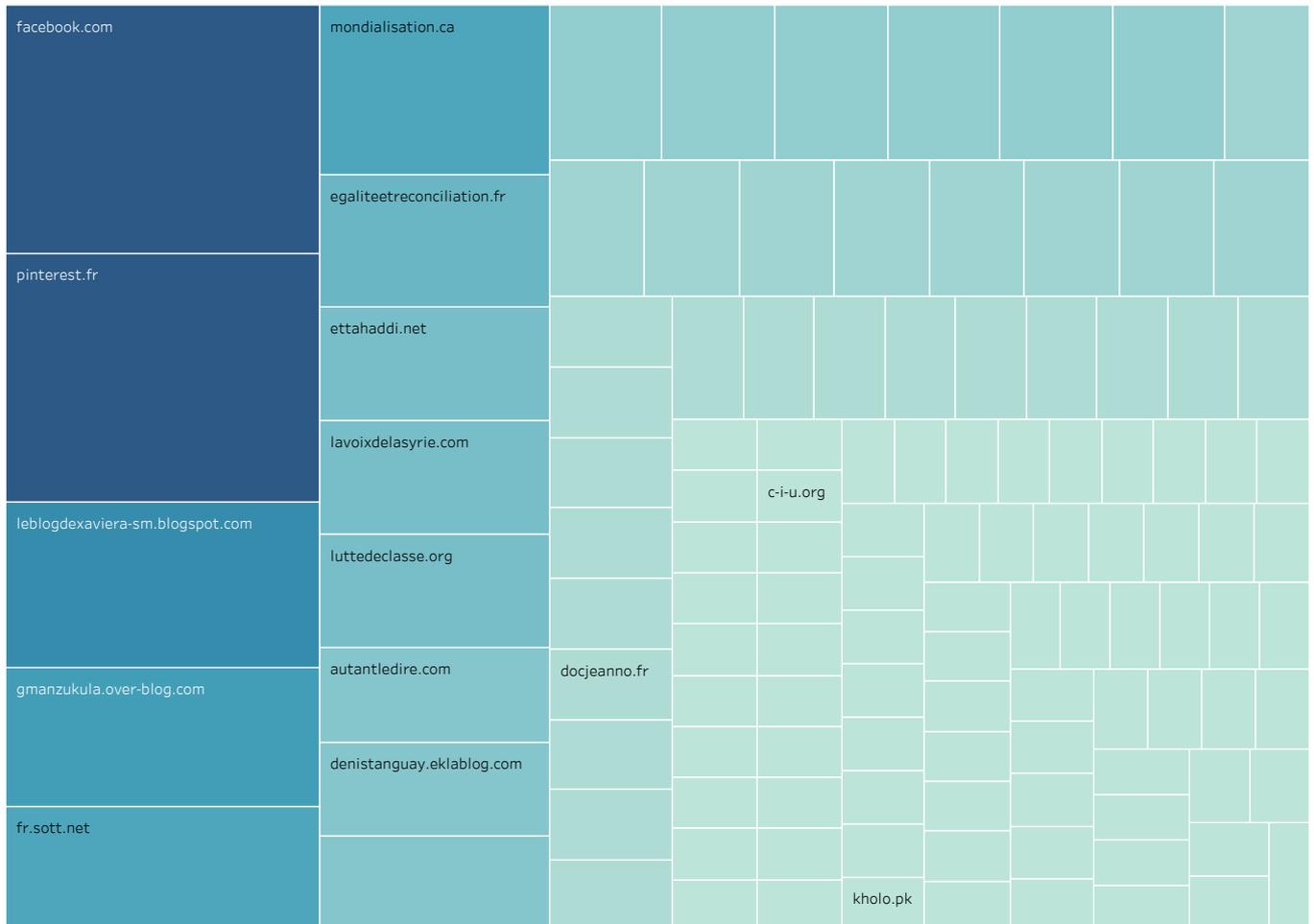
Now that we have defined the typology of the database, we can look at the way in which these sites relay the content of RT and Sputnik dedicated to Africa. We can observe that our database has a very heavy imbalance between these two platforms in the number of sites reproducing all or part of the content produced on them.



Ten times fewer relays for RT than for Sputnik

As can be seen from the pie-chart on the previous page, Sputnik has ten times more “relays” (3,569 sites) than RT (330 sites). These results are hardly surprising, because the two media agencies occupy quite distinct positions in terms of editorial line and target audience. RT, which was founded in 2005, has for some years now clearly pursued a strategy consisting in portraying itself as a media channel that has fully adopted all the codes of the major international press agencies. Although its editorial line has not fundamentally changed for several years, RT produces less “sensational” content than Sputnik and is therefore less likely to be relayed by blogs or institutional websites that do not maintain any fixed relation to the positions defended by Russia on the international stage.

Ranking of sites relaying the most content from RT
(The size of the cells is proportional to the number of times the relevant site reproduces RT content)



Here, it can be seen that, apart from the intermediation platforms, the websites that relay RT content are, for the most part, clearly identified militant institutional sites with a highly international audience (i.e. not restricted to only one country or region of the world). For example, we find here the French-language version of the conspiracy site Signs of the Time (sott.net), administered by the religious organization Quantum Future Group, which is based in North Carolina. We also find various “heavyweight” conspiracy sites, such as mondialisation.ca and the website of Égalité et Réconciliation, the organization founded by Alain Soral. Overall, only very few sites with genuine roots in Africa are present in the database of websites that have relayed RT content. Although this does not in any way preclude the possible success on the African continent of French-language content produced by RT (since conspiracy

sites, like the RT France website, have very high traffic in Africa), it is clear that this content has almost no rooting in the “ecosystem” of local media or blogs – unlike Sputnik.

The over-representation of Sputnik: statistics and hypotheses

The over-representation of Sputnik can first be explained by the history of this news agency: it was established in 2014 to replace two former agencies that had previously offered a French-language service – La Voix de la Russie (Voice of Russia) and RIA Novosti (international service) – which were merged into a single unit under the Rossiya Segodnya agency (Sputnik’s parent company). Respectively created in 1922 and 1941, the two former news agencies had been powerful organs of influence used by the USSR throughout the Cold War and by the Russia of the early 2000s. In fact, La Voix de la Russie / Voice of Russia was the successor of the infamous Radio Moscow, which had operated a large French-language service inaugurated in 1929. Widely listened to by French communists during the Occupation and the entire Cold War, its name, and its time signal (an instrumental chime of the first notes of *Moscow Nights*) have remained engraved in the collective memory. After the collapse of the USSR, the French-language service continued broadcasting under the name La Voix de la Russie, and in 2010 it underwent a major transformation when a portion of its personnel was replaced by a younger generation of French-born editors. These “new journalists” (some of whom also signed articles for Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) were mostly close to the ideas of the far right and produced content that was resolutely infused with conspiracy theories.²⁰ When this service was merged into the new Sputnik agency in 2014, a process of professionalization was launched, and some of the former editors continued their work in the news agency of the Donetsk People’s Republic, one of the two separatist entities established after the Maidan revolution and the annexation of Crimea. This first generation was then replaced by personnel who were better trained and less radical.

The other agency merged to form Sputnik, RIA Novosti, was the successor of Sovinformburo which, during the Second World War, had the principal mission of covering the situation on the front and the action of the partisans. During the Cold War, RIA was one of the three big news agencies of the USSR, alongside Interfax and Tass. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the service continued to produce dispatches in French, and in the years around 2010, it established an “opinion” section, with contributions by French authors, some of whom continue to be employed by RT. This section consisted of opinion pieces which, although radically less far-fetched than the contents of Voice of Russia, clearly vaunted their anti-Americanism and zeal for national sovereignty.

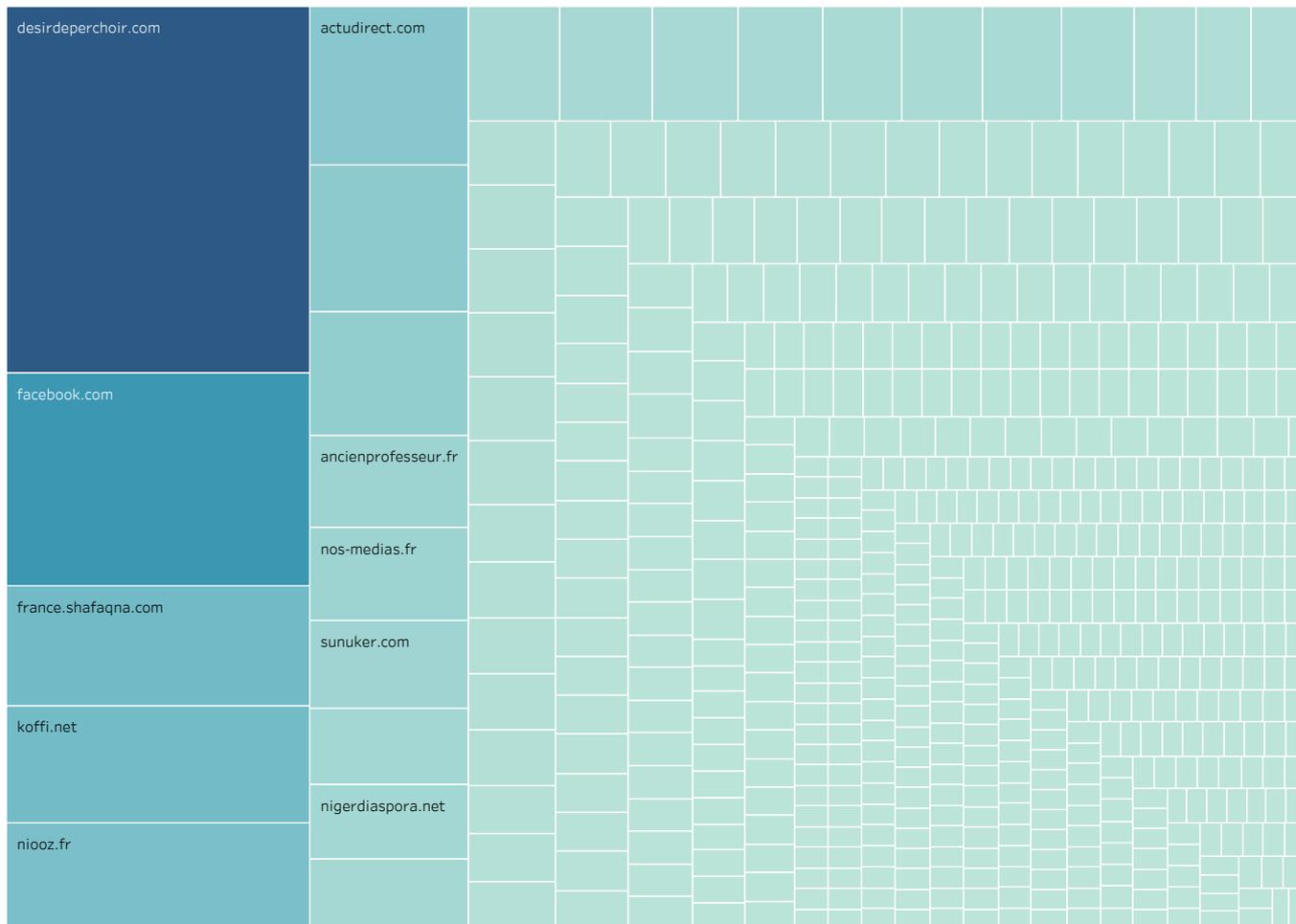
Indeed, as the heir to these two structures, Sputnik has a more militant editorial line than RT and has inherited from its two ancestors a certain tradition of sensationalism, which is well-adapted to modern techniques for optimizing visibility, such as clickbait.²¹ Although this technique is primarily a feature of social networks (which, we would remind you, are not studied here as such), it remains basically viable for websites that reproduce external content: these sites, or at any rate some of them, seek to reap the benefits of content conceived to create a “buzz.”

That said, we do not exclude the possibility that the imbalance between the number of sites relaying RT content versus the sites relaying Sputnik may also be partly due to our method of selecting the 500 or so articles used as a starting-point for this study. The fact is that Sputnik produces more articles dedicated to Africa than RT: the imbalance could therefore be a simple result of arithmetic, with RT having fewer relayed articles because it has fewer articles to relay.

20. To gain an idea of this heavy influence of conspiracy theories, we recommend reading this article, which suggests that the MH17 was deliberately destroyed by western forces above Ukraine, and that the bodies found at the crash site were “plastinated corpses.” Due to the closure of La Voix de la Russie, the article is no longer online. However, an archived version is still available at the following address: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140912100422/http://french.ruvr.ru/2014/09/09/Le-vol-MH17-de-Malaysia-Airlines-rempli-de-cadavres-plastines-2630/>.

21. “Clickbait refers to a set of techniques designed to attract a maximum number of users to a content. Generally using sensationalist headlines, clickbait was originally used by websites with the sole objective of maximizing their advertising revenues. The Russian news agencies have been the pioneers in adopting these techniques for purposes other than the purely financial.

Ranking of sites relaying the most content from Sputnik
(The size of the cells is proportional to the number of times the relevant site reproduces Sputnik content)



In addition to the fact that they are more numerous than those of RT, the sites reproducing Sputnik content concerning Africa have much closer ties to the continent. Apart from Facebook and four content aggregators, of which two seem to have a syndication policy favouring conspiracy theories (niooz.fr, already mentioned above, and actudirect.com), the fifteen platforms that relay the most content from Sputnik are “institutional” websites, such as koffi.net, which addresses the readership of Ivory Coast, the Senegalese site sunuker.com, or the site nigerdiaspora.net from Niger. We can note that none of these sites have an editorial line that would lead us to suppose that they are privileging one source of information over another. Another interesting fact that we have observed is that two of the websites counted among the main relays of Russian content concerning Africa are not actually based in Africa but belong more to the Iranian sphere of influence: these sites are france.shafaqna.com, the website of the International Shia News Association (a press organization focusing on news from the Shia world) and french.manartv.com.lb, the website of the Lebanese Al Manar TV channel, of which Hezbollah is the majority shareholder. The presence of these two websites in our database is interesting: although these agencies are not strictly speaking focused on Africa, they seem to attach some importance to the continent in their French-language versions. One possible explanation of this interest could be that these sites (especially Al Manar) are followed by Muslim populations in North Africa and France.

ANALYSIS OF THE THEORETICAL VISIBILITY OF RUSSIAN CONTENT PER COUNTRY IN FRENCH-SPEAKING AFRICA

The example of these two news agencies shows how difficult it is to conduct an analysis of our relays on the basis of territorial logic: although some websites have strong geographical roots (for example, the sites explicitly presenting themselves as media from a particular country), others aim for a more global audience. Similarly, some of the sites that have strong geographical roots may have a large proportion of their audience outside their geographical area. This is all the more true in Africa, where a considerable proportion of the audiences of the local websites comes from the diasporas located in Europe and North America. In general, frontiers are hard to define when studying the circulation of digital textual content: for example, a Senegalese news site may have its servers based in France, be registered under a domain name not directly in the jurisdiction of Senegalese law (.com for example) and may have a large diasporic audience, i.e. an audience based outside the borders of Senegal.

Method adopted to create and present the map

Despite all these factors, territorial logic is not entirely abolished by the fact of instant access to content from anywhere in the world. For example, a website dealing mainly in news from Ivory Coast will always essentially be browsed by Ivorians. For that reason, we have chosen here to focus on about sixty websites that are present in our database and that we consider to have strong territorial roots on the African continent. For this purpose, we founded our analysis on the data provided by Alexa, a company belonging to the Amazon group and specializing in website traffic statistics. This service provides a “traffic rank” per country for almost every website: this traffic rank is determined on the basis of “the browsing behaviour of people in [a] global data panel which is a sample of all internet users.”²² In practice, this means that the higher a website’s traffic rank, the more frequently it is visited in a given country. The highest rank is 1, which corresponds to the most frequently visited site.

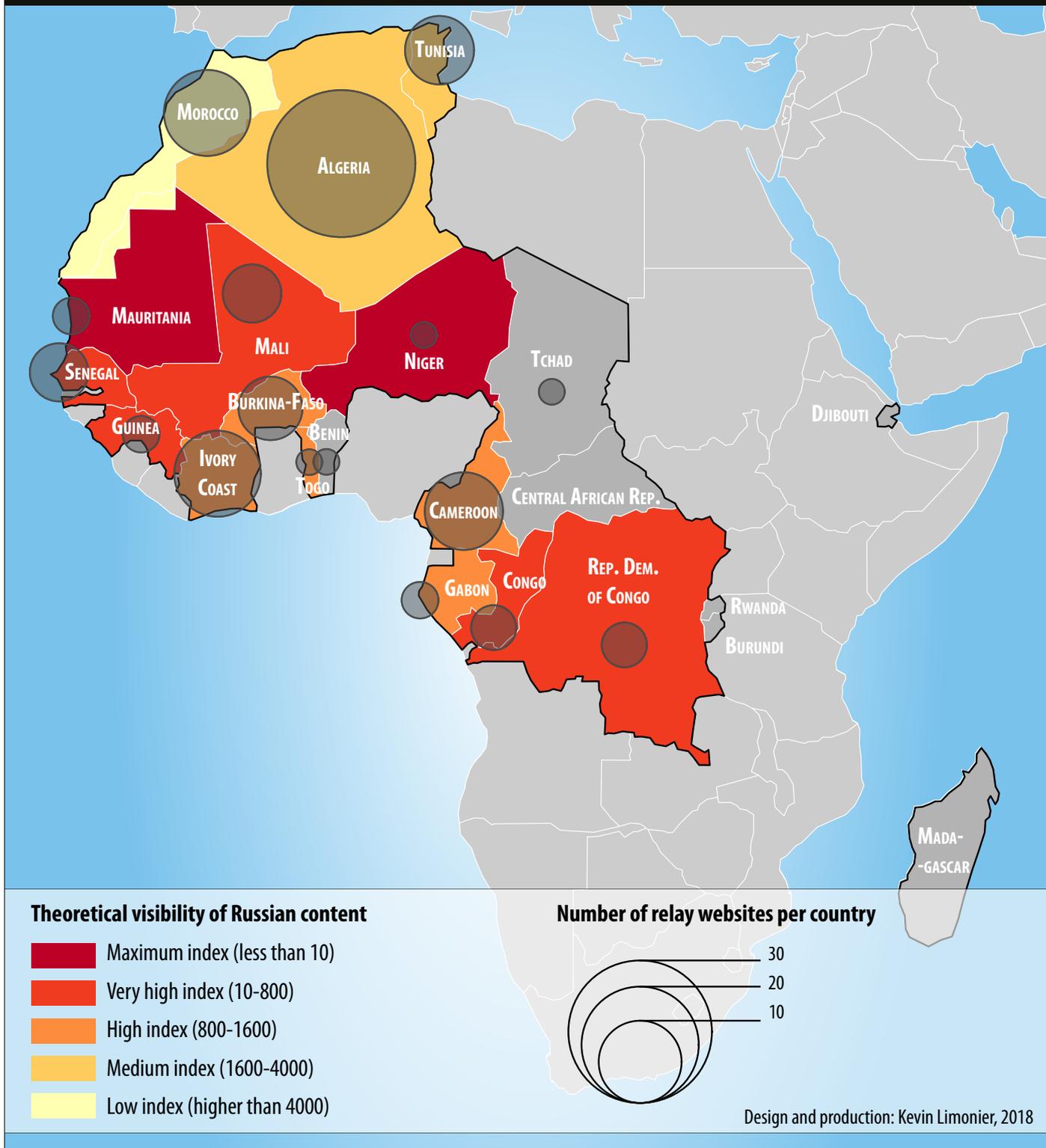
In our case, we compared the 622 websites in our database with the rankings provided for each website by Alexa and decided to retain only the sites for which at least one French-speaking African country is in the list of the top four countries where the site in question is most popular. The 65 websites meeting these criteria (or about 10% of the total database) were then used to create the map below (p. 12).

This map represents a “theoretical visibility index” per country, calculated by dividing the traffic ranks of our 65 sites by the number of times that the site reproduced content from Sputnik or RT. We then calculated an average per country, based on the sum of the theoretical indexes obtained for each site. For example, the site koffi.net with a traffic rank of 1,347 in Ivory Coast, reproduced Russian content on 51 different pages, giving a theoretical visibility index of 26.41 (1347/51). Note that the closer the index is to 0, the more the content is theoretically visible: a website with a traffic rank of 2 (i.e. the 2nd most frequently viewed site in the country in question) but only reproducing Sputnik or RT content on a single page will logically have an index closer to 0 than a website ranked 8000th and reproducing 100 different Russian-content pages.

Evidently, this experimental approach has numerous biases. Firstly, it postulates that Russian content relayed on a popular website will be more visible than on an ordinary page that is not visited frequently. This is not necessarily the case in practice. Also, this approach excludes, *de facto*, the blogs hosted on platforms such as wordpress.com or overblog.com, because Alexa does not measure sub-domains (i.e., in the case of blog address xyz.wordpress.com, Alexa will only measure the Wordpress domain, not the sub-domain xyz, which uniquely identifies the blog in question). Finally, it would seem that Alexa does not measure the traffic from smartphones (in particular devices running the Android OS): this is undoubtedly the most significant distorting bias, given the popularity of smartphone use in Africa.

22. <https://support.alexa.com/hc/en-us/articles/200449744-How-are-Alexa-s-traffic-rankings-determined->.

THEORETICAL VISIBILITY OF RUSSIAN CONTENT IN AFRICA AND RELAY WEBSITES PER COUNTRY



Finally, the calculation and mapping of this index should clearly not be interpreted as reflecting the impact of the content produced by RT and Sputnik on the African population: the aim is simply to estimate the approximate visibility of this content, not to measure its reception or its effect on the public concerned. In other words, this map does not aim to present a statistical picture of Russian influence in Africa. On the contrary, its aim is to provide a tool for narrowing down the specific regional dynamics involved in the mechanism of propagation of content produced by the Russian platforms.

Proposed typology of countries

So, in this study, we can divide these dynamics into three main categories of countries, to provide a better understanding of the conditions under which RT and Sputnik content is relayed.

Category 1: few relays but high visibility

The first category is that of countries with a low number of relays but high visibility. This is especially the case of Mauritania, Niger, Guinea, DRC and Gabon. In these countries with a high visibility index, the number of websites that relay RT or Sputnik and that have a national base clearly identified by Alexa is particularly low, often only one or two sites. In Mauritania, for example, the visibility index is particularly high because Sputnik content is often reproduced by two sites that are very popular in the country, [cridem.org](#) (8th most visited site in Mauritania according to Alexa) and [essahraa.net](#) (9th most visited). The same is true for DRC, where the [Mediacongo](#) site, which sporadically shows Sputnik content, is the 6th most visited site in the country. In Niger, the very high index of the country is particular due to the [nigerdiaspora.net](#) website, the 12th most frequently visited in the country. In all the countries of this first category, the relay sites, according to the terminology defined above, are “institutional” and, in the opinion of the author, do not have a sufficiently clear political orientation to judge that their relaying activity is due to any particular militant intent.

Category 2: numerous relays and high visibility

The second category consists of the countries with both a high visibility index and a large number of websites relaying Russian content. This is particularly the case of Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso. In these countries, unlike the countries of the first category, the ecosystem of websites reproducing the content of RT and Sputnik is diversified: in Senegal, for example, the relay sites comprise both general news sites with either a national audience²³ (such as [senegalinfos.com](#)) or a more local viewer base (such as [thiesinfo.com](#), the news site for the Thies region) and sites with a clear specific position, such as [sene-leaks.com](#). Mali, too, has a number of popular generalist websites, such as [bamada.net](#) (32nd most visited site in the country) or [niarela.net](#). In Burkina Faso, the websites that relay Sputnik or RT include Ivorian sites browsed from Burkina Faso ([imatin](#)), as well as politically engaged sites addressing all of French-speaking Africa, such as [africa24.info](#), which was discussed above.

Category 3: very many relays and moderate visibility

The third category consists of the countries with a modest visibility index but a very large number of websites relaying Russian content. In other words, these countries have a large number of websites reproducing Sputnik or RT, but the sites in question do not necessarily have a big audience. This is principally the case of Cameroon, Ivory Coast and Algeria – the latter having by far the highest number of relay sites in Africa. In these three countries, the density of the ecosystems seems to be due to the fact that the content of Sputnik or RT is not always relayed non-selectively or without specific intent but is sometimes also relayed to reinforce certain arguments inherent to the internal politics of these countries. For example, in Ivory Coast, we have noticed that a certain number of websites and blogs that reproduce Sputnik content clearly state their pro-Gbagbo positions – which supports the premise, raised at the beginning of this paper, that internal militancy is one of the reasons behind the circulation of Russian news material. A similar dynamic seems to be at work in Cameroon, for example with the [afriquemedia.tv](#) website, which is the official site of the Pan-Africanist channel Afrique Media (based in Douala); for some time, one of the directors of this channel was the Franco-Beninese activist Kemi Seba, a controversial figure of black radicalism and in the campaign against the CFA

23. We can note the disappearance of the website [seneweb.com](#) from our database, after being included in a previous data extraction. This is because this site, which is one of the most popular in Senegal, seems to have stopped reproducing Russian content since a few months ago.

Franc.²⁴ However, it is especially in Algeria that the circulation of Russian news materials for political reasons is the most flagrant: no less than 32 Algerian websites repeat the content of RT and Sputnik. Some of these websites, such as algeriepatriotique.com or lesoirdalgerie.com, seem to have a specific political connotation. Nevertheless, here too, detailed and precise knowledge of the internal political debates in Algeria would be necessary for a full understanding of the internal organization of this ecosystem. In fact, we believe that a specific analysis of each of these countries in category 3 by experts on the zone could significantly increase our understanding of the mechanisms of propagation of Russian content in these countries, both inside the countries themselves as well as with the outside world. This recommendation derives from the observation that the ecosystem of Algerian relay websites is so large and active that it spills into Morocco and Tunisia, where the RT and Sputnik content theoretically viewed is accessed on Algerian websites.

ATTEMPTED TYPOLOGY BY RELATIONSHIP GRAPH AND HYPERLINK COMMUNITIES

Since the start of this paper, we have deliberately used the term “ecosystem” to designate all the websites that – whether deliberately or not – relay textual content concerning Africa produced by RT or Sputnik. In using this term, our postulate is that the websites that we are examining constitute a set of entities that interact within a given environment. In other words, they have relations between one another.

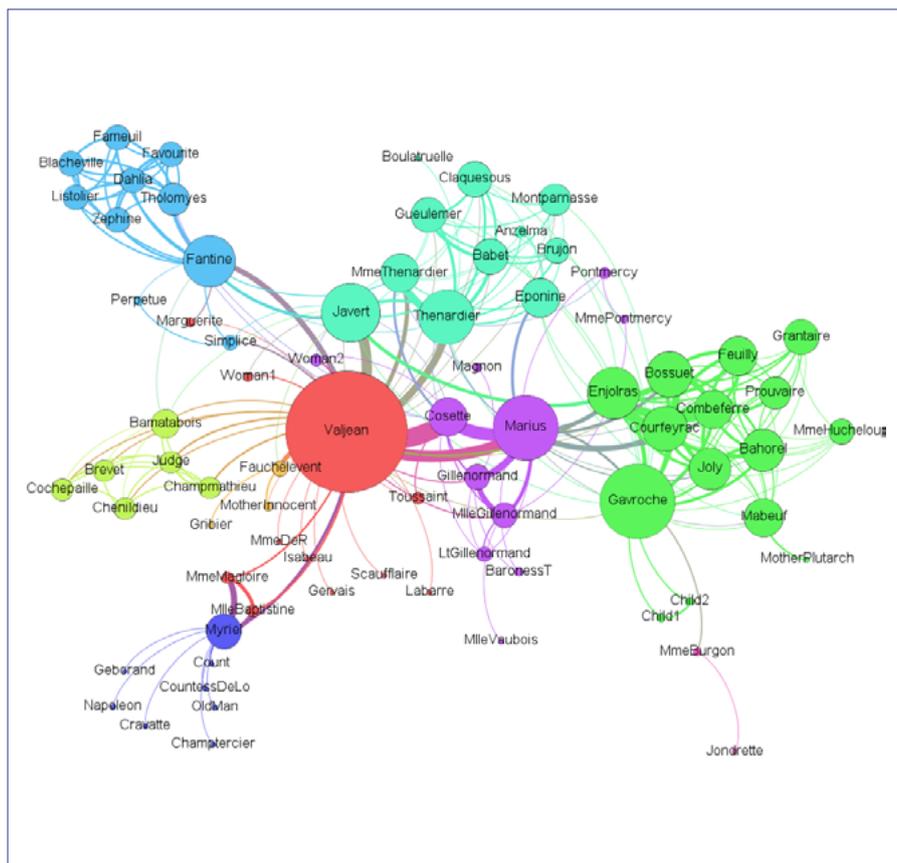
What is a “relationship graph”?

A priori, this postulate is confirmed simply by the operating logic of the World Wide Web (WWW), which owes its name to the fact that it is structured by a system of hyperlinks (or hypertext links,) which, by interconnecting the sites that constitute it, gives the WWW the appearance of a spider’s web. Thus, all the websites that link to at least one external website constitute an ecosystem that can theoretically be mapped by relationship graphs. These graphs are graphic representations consisting of nodes interconnected by lines in order to visualize relational data, from the simple to the extremely complex. In our case, we can even speak of geometric (or “spatialized”) relationship graphs, since the positions of the points on the surface of the graph are determined by a spatialization algorithm as a function of the relations between individual nodes. For this part of the study, we used Force Atlas,²⁵ an algorithm generally used by researchers in human and social sciences due to its clarity of network visualization. This clarity derives from the fact that Force Atlas uses notions such as the force of attraction or repulsion of a node to position each node on the graph in relation to one another. In other words, with Force Atlas, the closer two nodes are displayed together, the more direct or indirect links they share. Indeed, the relative positions of the nodes can help to identify tendencies and understand the structure of relations and, ultimately, deduce qualitative trends.

24. <http://www.cameroonvoice.com/news/article-news-20242.html>.

25. Mathieu Bastian, Sebastien Heymann and Mathieu Jacomy, “Gephi: An Open Source Software for Exploring and Manipulating Networks,” s.l., s.n., 2009.

Example spatialized relationship graph representing the relations between the different characters in *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo



(Source: Gephi)

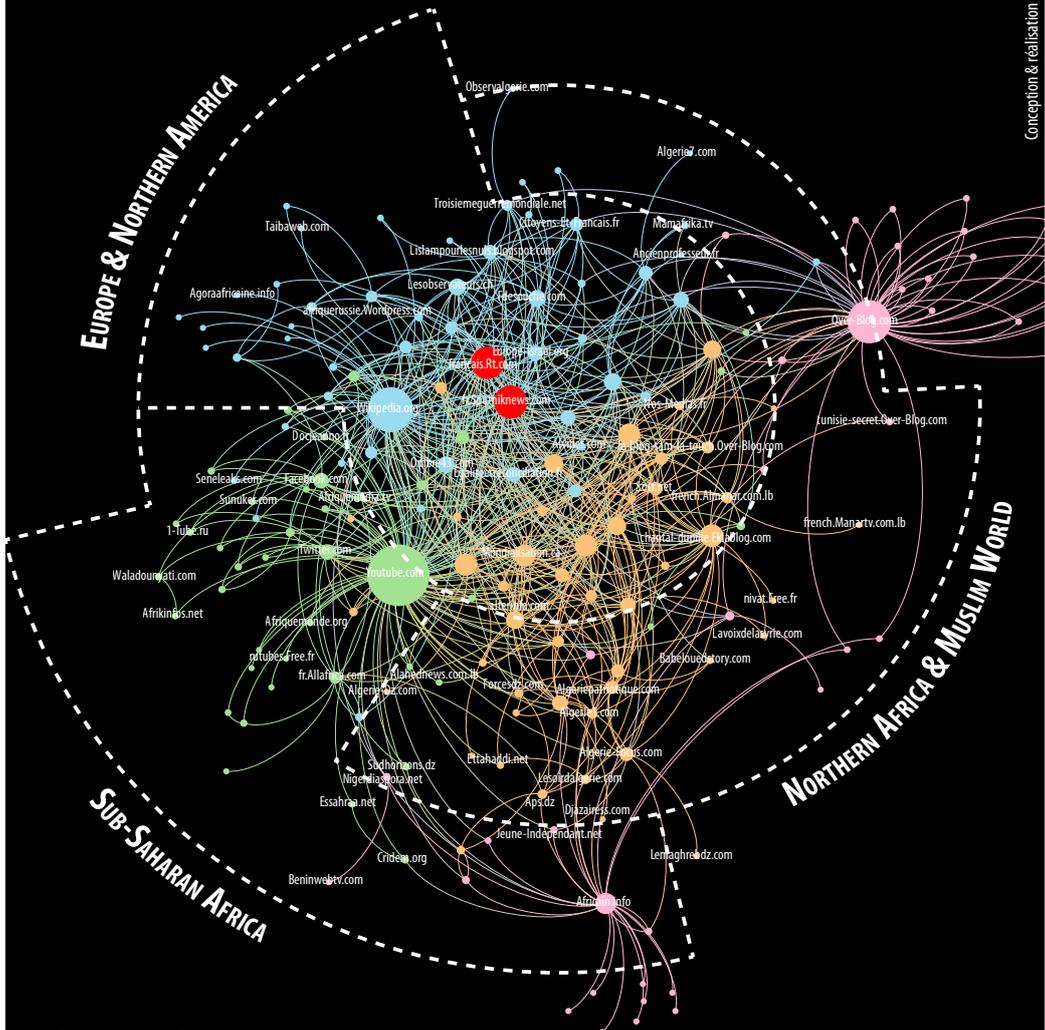
Although a representation of the entire web by relationship graph is of course impossible, due to the enormous computing capacity required, it is entirely possible to establish graphs focusing on small sections of the web – in this case the 622 websites in our database. By graphically representing the relations between all these sites, we shall attempt to complete our analysis per country; in particular we will attempt to identify some of the major political or discursive dynamics that structure the ecosystem of websites that relay RT and Sputnik content concerning Africa. In doing so, we will obtain a clearer picture of the factors that can help explain the success of these two platforms, or, at least, gain an idea of the major political and narrative tendencies of their relays.

Presentation of the graph

A semantic or political interpretation of a relational graph of the web presupposes the acceptance of the following postulate: the hyperlinks inserted by a site are not random and generally refer to third-party content that reinforces the positions held by the site. In practice, this means that a blog that is committed to the Palestinian cause will have fewer links to a site promoting Zionism than to an avowedly pro-Palestinian site. Exceptions can of course occur, for instance when site “A” refers to the content of site “B” to discredit or ridicule it. Similarly, generalist websites (meaning, in this context, platforms such as Wikipedia) provide links to all types of content. However, these exceptions generally remain minimal and do not generate any major spatialization, i.e. the process by which an algorithm determines the spatial position of each of the points on the graph and, ultimately, produces a map such as the one shown on the next page.

GENERAL MAP OF WEBSITES RELAYING RUSSIAN CONTENT * CONCERNING AFRICA

Conception & réalisation : Kevin Limonier, 2018



Modularity Analysis



Community 1
Community mainly consisting of websites administered from Europe or addressed to global French-speaking audiences. The sites in this community are on the extreme right of the political spectrum. Some of them take an openly Islamophobic line. The few African websites in this community tend to have a world view marked by conspiracy theories. All give major coverage to the Syrian crisis, which is a common denominator



Community 2
This community mainly consists of European and Algerian websites, apparently with the common denominator of anti-Zionism and, more broadly, condemnation of western foreign policies. Unlike Community 1, the general political tone here is more to the left.



Community 3
This community particularly comprises websites from Sub-Saharan Africa and is organized around intermedia-tion platforms, such as YouTube, Twitter or Facebook. It does not have any particular political tone, reflecting the fact that the sites relaying Russian content in Sub-Saharan Africa are quite far removed from the traditional relays of RT and Sputnik.

Community 4
This community is essentially organized around the over-blog platform and the africain.info aggregator site. This is the community of the African "blogsphere" that relays Russian content. This community too is generally quite far from the traditional relays of RT and Sputnik.

*The proportional size of the circles corresponds to the average number of incoming and outgoing degrees (links).
* The term "Russian content" here means textual content in French produced by the RT and Sputnik agencies and concerning African news, collected using the methods described in the paper.*

The above graph represents all the hyperlinks that interconnect almost 200 of the 622 websites that we identified as relays of Russian content. To generate this graph, we used Hyphe, a tool developed by the Media Lab of the Paris Institute of Political Studies (“Sciences Po”). Hyphe crawls the sites on a predetermined list to extract all the hyperlinks, in order to create a graph interconnecting all the entities on the list.²⁶ The loss of 422 sites can be explained by the fact that the bot that we used to list the hyperlinks did not find any correspondence between any of these 422 sites and the remainder of the database.

A spatialization that reveals the major geographical zones of the French-speaking world

Starting from the premise that most of the hyperlinks represent the editorial and political choices of the website editors or administrators, we can therefore *read* the spatialization provided here and interpret its meaning, according to its proximity or distance from the other websites. In this case, our graph is organized concentrically and uses a relatively simple discretization process.

- The central circle contains almost all the sites in the graph that have a global audience and are not necessarily aimed at an African public. In fact, at the centre of this “first circle,” we find RT and Sputnik and, in direct proximity to them, sites such as Égalité et Réconciliation, Fdesouche and lesobservateurs.ch, which are all on the extreme right and often Islamophobic. This proximity to the Russian media is explained by the fact that RT and Sputnik are often quoted by these sites, which constitute important relays for spreading Russian content.
- The outer circle contains almost all the African sites, which are organized along a dividing line that fairly clearly separates the sites in Northern Africa, i.e. the Maghreb (on the right) from those in Sub-Saharan Africa (bottom left).

This spatialization would seem to indicate that, even in the case of Russian content concerning Africa, the European platforms remain the most highly represented relays, while the African sites are pushed back to the outer circle. However, although this spatialization follows a certain logic, it does not clearly explain why European far-right websites, which are often Islamophobic, are themselves connected to African platforms to form a unique and apparently paradoxical ecosystem.

Typology of the communities

To answer this question, we used a tool for automatic community detection, a process that is also termed “modularity analysis.”²⁷ Modularity, which is mainly used in the analysis of social networks, consists in partitioning a graph into communities, i.e. into groups of nodes sharing more links between them than to the nodes outside their group. In our case, the modularity algorithm detected four large communities that each contained between 40 and 50 nodes (sites). Two types of community can immediately be identified – “structural” communities and political communities.

Political communities

In these communities, the significant nodes share the same idea or the same element of discourse. In other words, the central nodes (or structural nodes) of these communities are websites that share a strong common political or discursive identity. This identity tends to become less visible as distance from the community increases.

In our graph, the community with the most visible political orientation is without a doubt Community 1 (blue). Its central nodes are websites with provocative URLs, such as lislampourlesnuls.blogspot.com, lesobservateurs.ch, Fdesouche.com, troisiemeguerremondiale.net (“third-world-war.net” a website that has appointed itself “the goal of demonstrating that we are heading towards a religious war”). The community also contains europe-israel.org, a website presenting itself as aiming “to unite European citizens of every faith and every origin who wish to affirm their

26. Mathieu Jacomy, Paul Girard, Benjamin Ooghe-Tabanou *et al.*, “Hyphe, a Curation-Oriented Approach to Web Crawling for the Social Sciences,” in *Proceedings of the Tenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (ICWSM 2016)*, AAAI, p. 4.

27. Renaud Lambiotte, Jean-Charles Delvenne, Mauricio Barahona, “Laplacian Dynamics and Multiscale Modular Structure in Networks,” *IEEE Transactions on Network Science and Engineering*, No. 2, Vol. 1, 2015, p. 76-90.

support for Israel.”²⁸ This site devotes a very large number of articles to radical Islam and the European migration crisis. The common denominators of these sites are of course their very marked Islamophobic positions and their hostility to the migrants arriving on the European continent. Quite logically, this community includes very few African websites, with the exception of a few at the extreme outer edge. Most of the websites in this community publish articles (mainly stories of reported crimes and incidents) taken from Islamophobic platforms. However, we also find a few militant institutional sites, such as africa24.info (see above) or mamafrika.tv, a website that is particularly visited by users located in Congo and Cameroon and offering an approach to international news through the lens of the major fields in which Russia has invested.

Home page of mamafrika.tv on 11 October 2018



The other large political community is Community 2 (orange). Politically, it is both very far from and very close to Community 1. It is organized around blogs and websites that seemingly have as their common denominator anti-Zionism and, more broadly, hostility to Israel. This community is structured around websites such as the very active blog of Chantal Dupile, a writer and blogger who has notably qualified France as “radically Zionist and Masonic, obnoxious),”²⁹ or as another example, the website of the French-language version of Al Manar, belonging to Hezbollah. This community also contains some less radical websites, which for the most part are politically on the left or extreme left, such as blogs by communist militants or the newspaper website alterinfo.net. Finally, at the edge of this community, we find a large number of Algerian news sites. Again, our ignorance of Algerian political life prevents us from proposing a hypothesis regarding the motivations of these sites.

Thus, our two political communities would appear to be mutually antagonistic, with, on the one side, a community structured principally around far-right Islamophobic sites and, on the other, an ecosystem that is seemingly centred on anti-Zionism and generally leaning more to the left. However, this antagonism is only apparent because of several recurring themes shared by these two communities. These themes principally consist of near total support for the Syrian regime and constant criticism of economic and political liberalism. Underneath these redundant positions are other major themes, such as the criticism of American foreign policy or of European elites. These are the major themes classically adopted by the Russian platforms, and so we can see that their politically engaged relays cover the entire political spectrum, or at least its two extremes.

28. <http://www.europe-israel.org/about/>.

29. <http://chantaldupille.fr/mesarticles/rss/90-pourquoi-je-quitte-la-france>.

This political anchoring of the Russian platforms comes as no surprise. It has already been largely studied and has been the subject of numerous publications that have clearly shown some of the discursive and political resources³⁰ of *mjagkaja sila*,³¹ the Russian version of the American concept of soft power. However, it is interesting to note that even in the case of a set of sites relaying Russian content concerning African subjects, the fracture lines remain centered on international or European politics, with very little consideration for purely African controversies. Finally, a majority of the sites that are identified in our database as primarily addressing an African audience and quoting RT and Sputnik (with the notable exception of certain Algerian sites) escape from these Euro-centric subject classifications (islamophobia, migration crisis etc.). This could be due to our ignorance of the local political contexts but equally to the fact that many African websites relay Russian content non-selectively and without any particular political intent.

Structural communities

The structural communities are those organized around a method of sharing information (social network, blog platforms, etc.) and reflecting its *distribution structure*. For example, most of the blogs on the Overblog platform are part of the same community, because they are interconnected to the remainder of the graph solely via the central Overblog site. The structural nature of the community prevents any political interpretation of their position on the graph. These communities – two in total – essentially bring together websites that are connected to the rest of the graph via intermediation platforms. This means that the sites relaying Russian content concerning Africa do not provide hyperlinks to RT or Sputnik. For example, the nodes of Community 4 (pink) correspond mainly to blogs on the over-blog.com platform or to websites linked to the remainder of the graph via africain.info, a news aggregator. The websites of Community 3 (green) are connected to the remainder of the graph mainly via YouTube and, to a lesser extent, via Twitter and Facebook. With a few exceptions, the sites of these two communities do not seem to cite Russian content for militant purposes and, moreover, only rarely insert hyperlinks to RT or Sputnik.

CONCLUSION

While this quantitative study has shown the scale of the phenomenon of Russian content relaying on subjects concerning Africa (more than 3,889 web pages distributed over 622 unique sites during a period from 1 January to 1 August 2018), it has also highlighted the various political, human and technical contexts that can explain how and why this content is relayed. For example, most of the websites that we have identified as primarily addressing an African audience would seem to relay Russian content non-selectively. This observation tends to confirm the hypothesis that the RT and Sputnik news agencies have succeeded in their aim to obtain the “normalization” and institutionalization of their position as part of the media landscape of French-speaking Africa. Nevertheless, several sites did retain our attention and merit further in-depth examination, since they would appear to relay the content in a perspective of militancy. Additionally, we have shown that there is a wide disparity between the relaying of content produced by RT and content produced by Sputnik, with the latter being much more widely distributed on the subject of Africa. Although this disparity can be explained by the differences between the two Russian agencies, it is also probable that the success of Sputnik is partly due to a better acceptance of its editorial line by certain African audiences.

This study also showed that the dynamics of relaying Russian content can vary considerably from one country to another. Evidently, the typology that we have established between countries is only an initial outline that merits further and more detailed study in consultation with experts on the zones in question. In this respect, we draw your attention to the cases of Algeria, Cameroon and Ivory Coast, since these three countries concentrate a significant proportion of the sites that, in our database, appear to relay Russian content for political reasons.

Finally, we have established that the ecosystem of these relays is structured around certain political fracture lines on matters relating to the situation in the Middle East, and in particular Syria, Israel and Palestine. Here too, further detailed study is required, because these major themes seem to harbour a multitude of others, constituting a veritable “narrative universe” where some of these relays develop. Lastly, more detailed study of the results drawn from analysis

30. Tristan Mattelart, “Russia Today et le renouveau de la diplomatie médiatique russe,” *Annuaire français des relations internationales*, Vol. 19, 2018, p. 929-945.

31. Maxime Audinet, “Un soft power d’État russe : la miagkaïa sila,” in Jean-Robert Raviot (dir.), *Russie : vers une nouvelle guerre froide ?*, La Documentation française, 2016.

of our relationship graph could provide a better understanding of the major subjects of controversy that could explain the success of the Russian platforms in Africa.

The present initial quantitative study should be considered as a preliminary “path-clearing” operation that should be continued in conjunction with expert researchers specializing in this part of the world. Also, without even looking at specific local contexts, it is clear that this study raises the need for two additional studies to conform or refute certain hypotheses.

– First, it would be desirable to be able to compare the results of this analysis with those that might be obtained from studying other foreign media that publish content in the French language for African audiences. This would of course include China or Iran, but the question also concerns France and the United States, which have also established solid information and communication apparatus on the continent. A comparison between the mechanisms for circulating the content produced by the public media of these countries in Africa could enable a clearer identification of their differences and specific relays.

– A second extension to this study could be to reiterate the experiment with an expanded spectrum of information relays. Here, for several reasons, we concentrated on the vector of internet websites. However, other types of relays could be examined – including social networks, of course (with all the constraints implied), and also networks outside the digital sphere, such as NGOs, political parties or any other human group that, for one reason or another, appropriates the content produced by the public media of a foreign power. One such example, is the agoras and neighbourhood parliaments in Ivory Coast. In these informal political discussion spaces,³² articles from Sputnik are used by coordinators – who accord preference to Russian content in the informal process of political education of some of the citizens of the country.³³

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32. Armando Cutolo et Richard Banégas, “Gouverner par la parole : parlements de la rue, pratiques oratoires et subjectivation politique en Côte d'Ivoire,” *Politique africaine*, No. 3, Vol. 127, 2012, p. 21-48.

33. In an interview given to Sputnik in 2016, Achille Gnaoré, the president of FENAPAOC, the federation of informal parliaments, agora and orators of Ivory Coast (Fédération Nationale des Parlements, Agoras et Orateurs de Côte d'Ivoire) said that “the BRICS countries, in particular China and Russia [...] have demarcated themselves from the criminal policy that the West has dished up to us for centuries”.

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Kevin Limonier is lecturer in Slavic studies (CNU section 13 & 23) at the French Geopolitics Institute (Institut français de géopolitique) at Paris 8 University. He is also associate researcher at the Castex Chair of Cyberstrategy (IHEDN) and scientific director of Observatoire du Cyberspace Russophone, a research body at the Castex Chair dedicated to analyzing the post-Soviet Russian-language cyberspace. He also teaches in several training courses on cybernetic questions (Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan, etc.), and for many years he was a professor at the Russian State University for the Humanities (RGGU, Moscow). His research focuses on the development of new methods of mapping cyberspace, in particular in the post-Soviet context. More broadly, he is a specialist on the Russian-language internet (*Ru.net : géopolitique du cyberspace russo-phonie*, L'Inventaire, coll. "Les Carnets de l'Observatoire", 2018) and on territorial innovation policies in the USSR and contemporary Russia (*L'Archipel des savants : histoire des anciennes villes d'élite du complexe scientifique soviétique*, Éd. B2, 2017).

Contact : klimonier02@univ-paris8.fr